(In)visible Men

Emerging Research on Low-Income, Unmarried, and Minority Fathers

Rebekah Levine Coley
Boston College

The author aims to help make low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers more visible by reviewing the emerging literature base on this population and addressing important conceptual, methodological, and policy issues. Recent evidence is reviewed concerning patterns of fatherhood, factors that support or prohibit fathers' active involvement with their children, and the impact of paternal involvement on children's development. To move the field forward, advances are needed in methodology (increased use of father reports, multiple methods, and longitudinal studies), measurement (greater diversity and depth, multiple reporters), and theoretical and conceptual definitions (family systems perspectives, new and inclusive definitions of fatherhood). In particular, a multidisciplinary and contextualized perspective is an imperative aid to significantly increase understanding of the lives and impact of low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers.

Historically, fathers have been a rather invisible group in the study of child development and family processes, with their influence rarely considered and their voices scarcely heard. However, the past two decades have seen a significant growth in the public, political, and academic attention directed at fathers, addressing their roles in families, their rights and responsibilities, and their influence on their children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Within this work is an emerging focus on low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers. The importance of expanding understanding of these disparate but often overlapping groups of fathers is underscored by numerous dimensions: The majority of academic work concerning fathers has focused on married and middle-class samples. Thus, there is less information about men who fall outside of these parameters and a greater need to expand the conceptual and empirical base of knowledge. Significant public and political attention has been directed recently at low-income and minority fathers who do not fulfill the traditional married, residential, financial-supporter role. Nonmarital childbearing and noncustodial parenting, particularly prevalent among low-income and minority populations, are commonly defined as social problems contributing to family and community instability and problematic child development. Yet misperceptions abound concerning the prevalence and meaning of such demographic patterns: Thus, there is a significant need for further clarification on the range of normative roles that low-income, minority, and unmarried fathers fulfill, as well as on the precursors and effects of their fathering behaviors. This review seeks to make fathers, particularly low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers, more visible and to further conceptual and empirical understanding of their role in family life.

In this article, I review three main issues concerning low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers. The first section examines recent evidence on patterns of fatherhood. More specifically, it addresses how often and in what ways fathers are involved with their children and contribute to their upkeep and how fathers, families, and policymakers define and understand fathering behaviors. The second section discusses economic, social, and psychological forces that both support and prohibit the enactment of fathering identities; it also examines ethnographic, observational, and survey studies of fathers' involvement with their children and families. The third section addresses fathers' influence on their children, particularly focusing on recent research that has used innovative methodologies and conceptualizations of paternal roles to address how fathers affect child functioning in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral realms. Throughout the article, an emphasis is placed on (a) highlighting important conceptual and methodological issues in studying fathers, (b) addressing links with policy, and (c) supporting the claim that a multidisciplinary and contextualized perspective, drawing from diverse fields such as developmental psychology, sociology, demography, and economics, is necessary to help move forward the study of low-income, minority, and unmarried fathers and their children.

An earlier version of this article was prepared for presentation at the Urban Seminar on Fatherhood, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 23–24, 1999, with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I thank Anisha Desai for her research assistance; William Julius Wilson, Jim Quane, Vivian Gadsden, and Melvin Wilson for helpful comments; and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale for her intellectual participation in the development of many of the ideas contained in this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rebekah Levine Coley, Applied Developmental and Educational Psychology, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. Electronic mail may be sent to coleyre@bc.edu.

 0003-066X/01/$5.00
Vol. 56, No. 9, 743–753 DOI: 10.1037//0003-066X.56.9.743

Patterns of Fatherhood

A Historical View of Paternal Roles

In part because of historical shifts in family life and economics, popular conceptualizations of fathers' primary roles have experienced dramatic changes over time. In the 17th and 18th centuries, fathers were seen primarily as breadwinners and deployers of moral values and religious education (Chase-Lansdale & Vinovskis, 1995; Furstenberg, 1988). Society expected men to legitimate all births through marriage and to support their families financially. As the economy moved toward industrialization and urbanization, fathers transitioned from home-based farming and cottage industries to factories, removing them from households and families. Rates of abandonment and illegitimacy began to grow. By the first half of the 20th century, the federal government became actively involved in such family processes by creating Aid to Dependent Children, followed by Social Security, child support, and Aid to Families With Dependent Children. Welfare programs were developed to aid widowed or unmarried women in supporting their children, although some claimed that they also served to further remove men from their parenting responsibilities and to create barriers to the stability of poor families (Chase-Lansdale & Vinovskis, 1995).

The past few decades have brought even greater demographic change. As women moved from the home to the work force in substantial numbers, their financial power grew. Concomitantly, men's wages began to stagnate, and the relative importance of fathers' financial support of children and families declined (Blank, 1997; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Together, demographic changes increased women's financial freedom and made paternal financial support less necessary for some families. Related trends, including declining fertility, increasing rates of divorce and remarriage, and heightened rates of nonmarital childbearing (Cherlin, 1992; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999), have contributed to the removal of many men from traditional fathering roles and often from their children's households, leading to complex family systems with unclearly defined roles for fathers (Coltrane, 1995). For African American families, the legacy of slavery and the family instability driven by the slavery system may also continue to contribute to current family patterns (Patterson, 1998).

Current Patterns of Fatherhood

Theoretical models of fatherhood, which seek to outline the central constructs of fatherhood in today's society, are useful tools to direct discussion of fathering patterns and practices. For example, Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1996), expanding on ideas from Levine and Pitt (1995), defined responsible fatherhood as encompassing four tasks: providing financial support, providing care, providing emotional support, and establishing legal paternity. Research indicates that some or all of these tasks are often unfulfilled by fathers in the United States today, particularly low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers. Demographic trends have led to a situation in the United States in which a significant proportion of fathers are peripheral or transitory members of their children's households and minimal or unstable financial providers. In 1997, 32% of all children born in the United States were to unmarried mothers, a sixfold increase since 1960. Nonmarital birth rates were much higher for African Americans (69%) and Hispanics (41%) than for European Americans (26%; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Although some unmarried parents reside together (and some married parents do not), nonetheless, only 30% of African American, 54% of Hispanic, and 70% of European American children lived with their biological fathers in 1993. Great discrepancies are seen by income as well: Thirty-three percent of poor children resided with their fathers, as opposed to 70% of nonpoor children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

The numbers of nonresidential fathers appear to represent a disturbing removal of fathers from children's lives, further exemplified by many nonresidential fathers' lack of contact with, financial support of, and involvement with their children (Lerman, 1993). Although, at the time of their child's birth, most unmarried fathers appear to have good intentions of being involved and active fathers (W. Johnson, 2000), numerous studies have found that approximately half of nonresidential fathers have regular contact with their children during the first few years after birth (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Furstenberg, 1976; Lerman, 1993). These rates decrease to 20%–35% for school-age children and adolescents (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Lerman, 1993). Rates of father–child contact following divorce are also low, with recent national estimates indicating that about one third of divorced fathers have no contact with their children (Nord & Zill, 1996).

In addition, many unmarried and nonresidential fathers do not fulfill their financial responsibilities to their children. Recent census data indicate that only about 60% of eligible families—that is, families with a nonresidential parent—have legal child support orders; this rate is a mere 23% for never-married mothers (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan, 1998). Within families that have a child support order in place, less than one third of nonresident fathers pay the full amount they owe (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 [PRWORA]). Described in dollar amounts, only about $14 billion in child support was paid of the $45–$50 billion owed in 1990 (Miller, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 1997). In sum, less than 20% of children of unmarried parents receive the financial support they are legally entitled to from their nonresidential parent—in the vast majority of cases, their fathers (Miller et al., 1997).

Detailed ethnographic and survey data, however, indicate that significant amounts of paternal financial support, both cash and in-kind aid, may go unreported in formal systems (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Edin & Lein, 1997; Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer, & Seltzer, 1998). For example, in their study of low-income unmarried mothers in four cities, Edin and Lein (1997) found that 40% of their sample reported receiving financial support

from the mostly nonresidential fathers of their children. Similarly, in a sample of urban African American mothers of preschool children, 46% of the mothers who did not reside with their children's father reported receiving financial support (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). The discrepancy between data from the Census Bureau and from intensive ethnographic and survey studies may derive from parents' willingness to divulge sensitive information to the government and from the methods used to gather the information. Such reporting discrepancies encourage caution in interpreting data from any one source and provide some exemplars of different methodologies for gathering sensitive information from families.

The statistics on nonresidential fathers highlight the significant number of men who do not seem to be fulfilling the central roles of residing with, caring for, and financially supporting their children. However, there is also a growing trend for some fathers to be increasingly involved with their children and families (Coltrane, 1995). Fathers are doing more child care and household work than ever before, although they still do only a fraction compared with mothers and rarely take actual responsibility for these tasks (Coltrane, 1995; Parke, 1996). Similarly, although the numbers are still very small, a growing proportion of fathers is taking full (about 10%) or shared (15%–20%) custody of their children following divorce (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Much of the evidence on these trends comes from middle-class and European American samples, and there is very little information about highly involved fathers from low-income or minority samples (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Researchers such as Furstenberg (1988, 1995) have seen this growing divergence in fathering behaviors as indicative of the voluntary nature of fatherhood in today's society. With less clear cultural and moral guidelines and greater economic and childbearing choices for women, fatherhood is becoming a state that can be more individually interpreted and defined. In other words, society appears to lack a consensus concerning the appropriate role of a father, and there is great individual and subgroup variation in fathering behaviors. Greater research attention is needed to decipher cultural, social, and racial and ethnic patterns and interpretations of fathering behaviors.

Another pattern of fathering that has received relatively little attention is that of social fathering—that is, the role of men such as maternal partners, stepfathers, relatives, or friends who fulfill a father-figure role for children. In single-mother families where the biological father is absent and in populations with especially high rates of single-parent households such as African Americans and low-income families, social fathering may be particularly common. Recent evidence supports this contention. For example, when poor and near-poor African American adolescent girls were asked to nominate a man who was most "like a father" to them, 24% of the sample named a nonbiological father figure (37% of all of the men named; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2001a). Similar rates of father-figure involvement have been reported by school-age children (Coley, 1998) and adolescents (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993), and two recent studies of low-income African American families with preschool-age children found that one third to one half of mothers reported a father figure who was involved with their child (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Jayakody & Kalil, 2000). Research is just beginning to address father figures, and much remains to be learned concerning their roles in families, the factors that support or prohibit their taking an active fathering role, and how their stability or instability might affect children and families.

Conceptual Issues: Fathers' Views and Types of Involvement

Demographic and survey findings imply a lack of involvement by many unmarried, minority, and low-income fathers with their children. Yet conceptual and methodological issues constrain both the information itself and its interpretation. One issue concerns the source of data. Nearly all of the previously reported findings were derived from maternal reports, thus representing a narrow and possibly biased view of father involvement. The voices of fathers themselves have rarely been heard, an important deficiency in the data. Accessing only mother reports in research on children and families is a historical tradition based on numerous factors, including beliefs that mothers are the most important socializing agents of children and the best reporters of their status and behaviors, as well as more practical considerations of the difficulty of attracting men into research samples (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; McAdoo, 1993). Yet research has shown that mothers and fathers report significantly different levels of paternal involvement (Seltzer, 1991); thus, mother-report data might underestimate or misrepresent fathers' behaviors in ways not clearly understood. Especially in families with contentious mother–father relationships or noncohabiting parents, mothers may be less valid reporters of fathers' behaviors.

A second conceptual issue concerns how one defines fathers' roles or father involvement. Much of the survey information available on fathers, particularly unmarried or nonresidential fathers, focuses on very basic constructs of father involvement. Although residence, visitation, and financial support are seemingly objective and easily measured indexes of paternal involvement,[1] they represent an incomplete and simplistic view of parenting (Coley &

[1] It should be noted, however, that even these relatively objective measures are not necessarily as clear-cut as they appear to be. For example, financial support includes monetary contributions, which are easily quantified, albeit not always honestly reported, but may also include in-kind aid, such as buying supplies (diapers, clothes), providing services (handiwork), or providing shelter or food, which it is quite difficult to put an objective price on. Residential status may not be a simple construct either. Within poor unmarried families, men often divide their time between multiple residences. Also, because of continued concern with residential partners' influence on welfare and other benefit recipiency, respondents may not always report residence information truthfully. In a recent study of urban African American families in which mothers were asked to list all household members and then daughters were asked to list their father or father figure and report whether he lived in the house, there was a 23% discrepancy rate between daughters' and mothers' reports of the residency status of the father or father figure (Families in Communities Study, unpublished data, Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2001b).

Chase-Lansdale, 1999). They do not tap into fathers' emotional involvement with their children, the level of responsibility they take, the types of activities they do with their children, or their conceptualizations of fatherhood or paternal commitment. These are just some of the myriad constructs of parenting that have been seriously understudied in research on fathers.

As an example, listening to the views of poor, minority, and unmarried fathers themselves provides a very different picture from that portrayed in much quantitative work derived from maternal reports. In ongoing research with noncustodial urban African American fathers, Nelson, Edin, and Clampet-Lundquist (1999) found that fathering plays an integral role in many men's sense of self, even though by typical measures they are often marginally involved, at best, with their children. Many fathers claimed that becoming a parent had been a life-changing experience, leading them to drastically cut down on illegal and dangerous behaviors and giving them a reason to live. Furthermore, they saw their children as a means through which they could be more successful. That is, these disadvantaged fathers wanted what most parents want for their children: to do better than they themselves had, not make the same mistakes, and carry on their name and their heritage (Nelson et al., 1999). Traditional measures of paternal involvement, such as monetary contributions, shared residence, or custodial care, would not have captured much of the meaning and impact that fatherhood had in the lives of these men.

Policy Issues in Fathers' Roles

Another way in which one can seek to understand societal views of fathering roles is by considering the focus of current social policies. In recent years, there has been a substantially increased policy focus on fathers, particularly directed at the issues of paternity establishment and financial responsibilities. The federal government and numerous states have developed strict new laws governing guidelines for establishing paternity and collecting child support, and many believe that these laws appear to be directed disproportionately at minority and poor men (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan, 1998; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). For example, during the fervid national debate in the mid-1990s on reforming the nation's welfare laws and decreasing women's reliance on public aid, discussion focused heavily on the increasing prevalence of nonmarital births and the lack of formal child support received by many unmarried mothers and children. If child support payments to poor families were increased, the reasoning went, children would be better off, and many families would no longer be in need of (or qualify for) government aid. Hence, the recent welfare reform legislation in 1996 (PRWORA) contained strict enforcement guidelines for establishing paternity and cooperating with child support enforcement as requirements for women to be eligible for welfare. PRWORA also focused on marriage as the preferable mode in which to raise children and offered financial incentives for states to decrease their rates of nonmarital childbearing and increase the numbers of poor children residing with married parents. Interestingly, however, neither funding nor specific models were provided for such efforts (PRWORA of 1996).

It appears that the new welfare policies are beginning to show results. Recent estimates imply a significant increase in the rate of paternity establishment in nonmarital childbearing cases, from 19% in 1979 to 52% in 1996 (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan, 1998). However, rates of child support, or the proportion of eligible families who actually have a legal child support order in place, have remained flat in recent years, hovering at around 60% (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan, 1998). It is hypothesized that this stability is due to increasing proportions of nonmarital births, which continue to have significantly lower rates of child support orders than do divorced and separated couples. As the rates of paternity establishment among nonmarital births show substantial gains in response to strengthened policies, it is expected that child support rates will also increase in the near future (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan, 1998).

Some commentators and experts, however, question whether social policies seek to help children by increasing their connections with their fathers or rather simply seek to lower government costs for supporting poor children by demanding "financial responsibility" from unmarried fathers (Garfinkel, McLanahan, et al., 1998). For example, the stricter paternity and child support laws in the welfare reform bill did not include strengthened laws focused on fathers' rights to visitation or custody. In addition, if fathers of children on welfare pay child support, the state typically takes the money (or all but a minimal $50 "pass-through") to reimburse the costs of the mother's welfare check. In the past, child support rules were seen as an encouragement to poor families to bypass the formal system and sustain informal arrangements whereby fathers provided financial or in-kind support directly to mothers, who did not report it to the child support officials. In exchange, fathers often demanded time and contact with their children, thus fulfilling caring and relational aspects of their paternal role (Edin & Lein, 1997; Nelson et al., 1999).

With the new welfare laws requiring mothers to comply with the rules of paternity establishment and child support and with reports of mothers suffering welfare sanctions (having their welfare checks reduced or eliminated) for not cooperating (Cherlin et al., 2001), it is likely that compliance with child support rules will increase for poor families. Yet little is known about the effects of such changes on paternal involvement, mother–father relations, or child well-being.

Supporters of policies to increase nonresidential fathers' financial responsibilities hope that previous research findings regarding the strong links between different types of paternal involvement will be replicated—that fathers who are prodded into claiming paternity and paying child support by new policies will also increase their involvement with their children in other ways, seeing them more often and taking a more active role in their care and

upbringing.[2] Others, however, argue that the connection between child support and emotional involvement can only occur when fathers pay out of commitment, not out of duress from punitive public policies. Forcing fathers to pay support by garnishing wages, removing licenses, and other tactics may simply anger and alienate fathers and increase parental conflict, thereby harming rather than helping overall paternal involvement (Seltzer, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998).

One demonstration project, Parents' Fair Share, found that efforts to increase the employment, child support, and involvement of low-income noncustodial fathers within a supportive and rather extensive network of services produced very mixed results. Although some fathers increased their formal child support payments, there was a parallel reduction in informal support, thus leading to no net gain in mothers' financial well-being and even a possible loss when the influence of the welfare system keeping the formal child support payments was taken into account (Martinez & Miller, 2000). With regard to father involvement, Parents' Fair Share produced an increase in fathers' contact and visitation with their children only in some families, those with the lowest initial levels of contact, but also produced heightened mother–father conflict in such families (Knox & Redcross, 2000).

A second concern of advocates for low-income fathers is the inequality apparent in child support formulas. Low-income men are required to pay a significantly greater proportion of their income for child support than are middle- and high-income fathers (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan, 1998), and some fear that unreasonable financial demands and increasingly targeted efforts at collection (e.g., garnishing wages and tax refunds, removing licenses) simply lead poor fathers to stop paying child support altogether or even to drop out of the formal labor market. In short, further research and policy analysis are necessary to disentangle the effects of new policies and to determine whether their focus on low-income, unmarried fathers produces better financial and relational stability for low-income families and thus improves child well-being or rather increases low-income fathers' removal from the formal economy, increases parental contention, and thus harms families and children.

Supports of and Barriers to Father Involvement

Beyond the myriad explanations for the changing conceptions and uneven understanding of fathers' roles as nurturers, caretakers, and financial providers, why are men not consistently fulfilling either their own or others' expectations? Parenting theory points to a number of possible influences on fathers' behaviors. For example, Belsky's (1984) model of the determinants of parenting proposes the importance of three levels of influence: personal characteristics of the child, personal characteristics of the parents, and social and contextual influences. Research on low-income, minority, and unmarried fathers has concentrated most heavily on father characteristics such as human capital and paternal beliefs, as well as on social and contextual influences from both within and outside the family. In this section, I briefly review this literature and then discuss the use of public policies as tools to influence paternal involvement.

Fathers' Human Capital and Paternal Involvement

A father's human capital refers to his behaviors, skills, and knowledge that can be passed on to his children to foster their achievement and success in society (Becker, 1991). Human capital is most commonly operationalized in research as years of education and employment status. Numerous studies have found that low-income, nonresidential, and minority fathers with jobs and education are likely to be more involved with their children (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Rangarajan & Gleason, 1998; Stier & Tienda, 1993; Sullivan, 1993). Fathers' human capital characteristics could signify greater levels of responsibility or adherence to societal norms or could simply be a proxy for a father's ability to fulfill the traditional provider role or to pay child support. Research has found that many unemployed fathers' access to their children is barred by the child's mother or other family members because of the man's inability to provide for his child (Doolittle & Lynn, 1998; Edin & Lein, 1997; Nelson et al., 1999; Sullivan, 1993). It is also possible that unemployed men remove themselves from their children because of shame or disrespect (E. S. Johnson & Doolittle, 1998; Nelson et al., 1999).

Similarly, minority and low-income men who are employed are more likely to marry, and among married parents, employment and financial stability are important correlates of marital longevity. On the other hand, married men are more involved in parenting when they work fewer hours and have wives who work many hours and bring in a high proportion of the family income (Coltrane, 1995). This is not necessarily positive, however, as research on fathers who have lost their jobs or otherwise faced financial crises has shown that although fathers spent more time with their children in such cases, the quality of their parenting decreased (Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985; McLoyd, 1989).

Belief Systems and Paternal Involvement

Paternal beliefs about fathering and parenting responsibilities, forged by familial, moral, religious, and cultural influences, may also play an important role in determining father behaviors. Fathers with a stronger commitment to parenting and who see their role as a father as integral to their image are, not surprisingly, more involved fathers,

[2] It is interesting to note that the reverse pathway has rarely been considered—that is, that programs to improve the quality of father–child relationships may increase nonresidential fathers' commitment to financially supporting their children.

regardless of their marital and residential status (Black et al., 1999; Bruce & Fox, 1999; Hossain & Roopnarine, 1994; Roopnarine & Ahmeduzzaman, 1993). However, relatively little is known about how such beliefs are formed (Doherty et al., 1996; Furstenberg, 1995; Marsiglio, 1995) or about how much beliefs influence actions versus actions influencing beliefs. For example, fathers who start off being involved in the care of their infant may develop a strong commitment to parenting, and fathers whose paternal identity is an integral and important part of their self-concept are likely to put much greater effort into being involved and active fathers in a variety of domains.

One factor that may play an important role in the formation of parenting beliefs and practices is cultural environment (Doherty et al., 1996; LaRossa, 1998). For example, different patterns of paternal involvement and behavior are apparent across racial and ethnic groups. Whereas African Americans have nonmarital birth rates significantly higher than those of European Americans and slightly higher than those of Hispanics, unmarried African American fathers are more likely to visit and to participant in child-related decision making and marginally more likely to provide financial support than their European American or Hispanic counterparts (Lerman, 1993; Seltzer, 1991). Given the prevalence of nonmarital childbearing among low-income African Americans, African American men may have developed a more clear shared understanding of the role of unmarried fathers in their children's lives. Some support for this hypothesis is found in work by Furstenberg (1995) with a sample of low-income African American mothers and fathers who indicated a shared understanding of the role and characteristics of a "good" father. Other work with young Hispanic and African American low-income fathers has found differences between the two groups in community assumptions concerning fathers' responsibilities (Sullivan, 1993). African American men reported family and community pressure to play a nonresidential but somewhat involved father role, providing some financial and child-care support. Hispanics reported greater pressure to marry, and although they were expected to provide financial support to their child, they rarely participated in direct child care. These findings provide a hint of possible impacts of cultural norms on fathering behaviors. However, more research is needed to untangle the complicated relations between paternal beliefs, cultural or racial and ethnic practices, and individual factors such as education and employment on paternal behaviors. Longitudinal data, preferably tapping into fathers' conceptions of fatherhood prior to the birth of their first child, would be particularly helpful in this endeavor.

Family Factors and Paternal Involvement

In addition to individual factors, the family environments and relationships of men have a significant impact on their level of involvement with their children. The quality of the mother–father relationship and the fathers' current marital and parental roles are important factors predicting paternal involvement with children by nonresidential fathers. Quantitative and qualitative research has found that hostile or unstable parental relationships interfere with fathers' involvement with their children (Furstenberg, 1995; Nelson et al., 1999), whereas courteous or close relationships predict greater paternal involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; McKenry, Price, Fine, & Serovich, 1992). Interparental conflict has also been found to mediate the relationship between father–child contact and child functioning in middle-class and predominantly European American samples (Amato & Rezac, 1994; King & Heard, 1998), with further research needed in low-income and minority families.

Fathers' current family situations are also important and can present a barrier to paternal involvement. National data indicate that fathers who form new relationships and who father and live with new children become less involved with their children from a previous union (Jacobson & Edmondson, 1993; Seltzer, 1991; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993), although again, little evidence is available within low-income and minority samples. The evidence on the impact of new unions by mothers is inconsistent. National data show that new maternal unions decrease the involvement of biological fathers with their children (Zill et al., 1993), whereas a positive relationship has been documented in a low-income, minority sample (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999).

Extended family members, especially grandmothers, can also be important players in nonresidential fathers' situations. Researchers have hypothesized that among unmarried-parent families, support from extended-family members might decrease the desire or need of mothers for paternal involvement (Danziger & Radin, 1990). For example, in low-income and single-mother African American families, mothers and grandmothers are often the primary caretakers of children (Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Coley, Wakschlag, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999); thus, fathers may have difficulty forging a place for themselves in the family system. However, this claim has not received support in empirical work (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Danziger & Radin, 1990; Spieker & Bensley, 1994). Alternately, extended-family members and peers may encourage paternal involvement. Ethnographic work by Anderson (1993) has indicated that paternal grandmothers play an important role in pressuring young unmarried fathers to claim paternity and accept responsibility for their children.

Conceptual Issues in Understanding Paternal Involvement

As in the realm of understanding patterns of father involvement, conceptual and methodological shortcomings have hindered progress in expanding understanding of the supports of and barriers to paternal involvement for low-income, minority, and unmarried fathers. Two primary issues are the relative narrowness of the focus in research on fathers and the lack of longitudinal data.

More specifically, there is growing evidence concerning the important role that paternal human capital characteristics (employment and education) and family relation-

ships (between, e.g., fathers and mothers, grandmothers, and others) play in affecting fathers' involvement and behaviors. Yet very little research is available that can be used to compare or contrast the influence of these different factors or that allows a longitudinal examination to help determine the direction of effects. One explanation lies in the scientific training of the researchers. Economists and sociologists who study fathers tend to gather extensive information on economic and cultural issues, whereas psychologists often focus on measuring family relationships and individual functioning. Few data sets or studies have collected extensive measures of all of these realms. A second explanation concerns the difficulty and expense of gathering longitudinal data from fathers, particularly nonresidential minority fathers, who are extremely difficult to attract to and retain in research studies (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; McAdoo, 1993). To move their understanding of the role and place of low-income, minority, and unmarried fathers forward, however, scholars must expand research that combines the strengths of multiple disciplines and develop improved data collection strategies to increase the availability of longitudinal data.

Some recent research exemplifies these points. Edin and colleagues' (Edin, 2000; Edin & Lein, 1997; Nelson et al., 1999) ethnographic work with low-income women and men provides intriguing evidence on the complicated interrelations between men's economic status and conceptions of fatherhood, women's expectations and goals regarding marriage and family life combined with their more immediate needs for financial and emotional stability, and resulting difficulties for low-income unmarried couples to form a close bond that supports the active involvement of fathers with their children. Similarly, a recent article by Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) used extensive survey data that allowed the authors to combine a family systems perspective and human capital measures with retrospective longitudinal data on paternal involvement in multiple domains. The results provide a small step in helping to disentangle the direction of effects within changing patterns of paternal involvement and financial and relational stability among low-income parents.

Fathers' Influence on Children's Development and Well-Being

Within most of the work on fathering lies the assumption that fathers' presence in their children's lives represents an important source of support for children's healthy development. That is, it is assumed that greater paternal involvement, both from married residential and from nonresidential fathers, leads to better child outcomes. This assumption is derived from numerous theoretical claims, for example, that fathers provide human capital, which translates skills, knowledge, and opportunities to children; financial resources, which purchase goods and services; a model of involved and caring adult male behavior; and more direct practices such as emotional support, discipline, supervision, and behavioral regulation to children (Amato, 1995, 1998).

Although the assumption that fathers' involvement enhances children's development seems perfectly reasonable, there is actually relatively little evidence to support it, especially when considering low-income and minority fathers or fathers who do not reside with their children. Why is this so? Numerous studies have considered links between married fathers' behaviors and their children's well-being, but the vast majority have used small, middle-class, European American samples (see Amato, 1998; Lamb, 1997; and Parke, 1996, for overviews). Analysis of paternal influence in low-income, minority, and nonresidential samples is slim and tends to address less complex and process-oriented questions. For example, much of the extant research on nonresidential fathers has used national data sets with simplistic measures of paternal involvement such as the amount of child support paid and the frequency of visitation. Such studies have often shown negligible effects of father involvement on children's development (see Amato, 1998, for a comprehensive summary of this literature). However, in recent years, a small but growing number of studies have focused specifically on low-income and minority fathers and their children, using a variety of measures of paternal involvement and considering the context and process of family relationships. Many of these studies have also used innovative designs, including both residential and nonresidential and biological and social fathers in the sample. This section concentrates mainly on the small body of existing research and concludes with a discussion of future questions and research needs.

Fathers and Children's Cognitive Development and Educational Attainment

The most consistent findings concerning father involvement and children's outcomes in low-income, minority, and unmarried-parent families focus on children's cognitive and educational attainment. Research has shown links between the strength of father–child relationships (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993), fathers' nurturance (Black et al., 1999), father–child activities (Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarsson, & Henderson, 1990; Mosley & Thomson, 1995), and parenting style (Coley, 1998) and children's cognitive development, school achievement, and academic attainment. These studies controlled for family socioeconomic status, thus presumably partialing out the influence of fathers' financial and human capital contributions and focusing on men's emotional relationships and direct involvement with their children (but see below). They also considered children at various developmental stages and used a wide variety of measures and a broad definition of fathers, often including both biological and social fathers. A consistent finding across this research is that more involvement by fathers correlates with better cognitive and school functioning by children.

Fathers and Children's Socioemotional Development

Low-income, minority, and nonresidential fathers have also been found to influence their children's social and emotional functioning, but these findings are not as consistent as those concerning cognitive outcomes, and the correlations are not always positive. Zimmerman, Salem, and Maton (1995), for instance, found that low-income African American boys' relationships with and emotional support from their fathers or father figures (both residential and nonresidential) predicted higher self-esteem, lower depression and anxiety, and marginally lower delinquent behaviors. Similarly, in a sample of urban fourth graders, children's reports of warmth and control from nonresidential biological fathers and other father figures predicted fewer behavioral problems and better peer skills in school, particularly for African American children (Coley, 1998). However, other studies have found negative links between father involvement and children's behaviors and emotional well-being. In some studies, father involvement has been linked to positive outcomes for some children or adolescents but to negative behavioral outcomes for others, particularly low-income and African American children (Mosley & Thomson, 1995; Thomas, Farrell, & Barnes, 1996).

The meaning of discrepant results on father involvement is unclear, although it appears that both the quality of the relationship and children's expectations may play a role. For instance, in a longitudinal study of low-income and predominantly unmarried-parent African American families, Furstenberg and Harris (1993) found that a strong attachment to a father or father figure was related to fewer symptoms of depression among adolescents. However, the authors also determined that having a poor or contentious father–child relationship or having a close relationship in childhood or early adolescence that later decreased in closeness was more detrimental than having no relationship at all. Other research reinforces the importance of distinguishing the quality of the relationship rather than simply the availability of a father. In research with low-income African American adolescent girls, Coley and Chase-Lansdale (2001a) found that fathers' emotional disengagement predicted greater depressive symptomatology and behavioral problems for adolescents, whereas fathers' level of positive engagement was not predictive of youth outcomes. Moreover, fathers' emotional and physical disengagement had an additive effect, with the most problematic emotional and behavioral functioning apparent in girls whose fathers were both emotionally alienated and physically absent from their lives. The authors interpreted this finding as indicating that fathers were not fulfilling children's expectations; in short, the adolescents were disappointed and disillusioned in their relationships with their fathers.

It is not yet clear why such different findings have emerged across the realms of low-income, minority, and nonresidential fathers' influence on cognitive outcomes versus socioemotional outcomes. One possibility is that children's cognitive development and school outcomes are influenced by the availability of monetary and structural resources, which involved fathers are more likely to provide, as well as by emotional support. Although the studies of children's cognitive outcomes controlled for socioeconomic status or children's household incomes, as stated above, it is certainly possible that they did an inadequate job of measuring fathers' monetary and in-kind contributions, as well as their contribution of other resources such as links to educational opportunities and mentors. Thus, the measures of involvement used in fathering studies, which appear to focus on fathers' emotional connection to and activities with their children, might have also been picking up fathers' financial and human capital contributions. In contrast, children's social and emotional functioning may be affected more by fathers' emotional commitment to and quality of involvement with their children. As a few studies have indicated, fathers' commitment and quality of involvement may be less than optimal in some instances and thus be linked to problematic outcomes in children and adolescents.

Conceptual Issues in Fathers' Influence on Children

Within the realm of research on fathers' influence on children, there are a number of conceptual and methodological issues that are deserving of further attention. In general, significant strides have been made in the study of fathers' roles in families and impact on children, yet there are continued shortcomings that remain open to improvement.

For instance, recent studies of low-income, minority, and nonresidential fathers have shown some significant improvements in the conceptualization and measurement of father involvement and fathers' impacts on children. For one, recent research has explored measures that clearly begin to move beyond simplistic indicators of father presence or financial support and instead tap into the quality and characteristics of the father–child relationship. The research reviewed above presents an exciting initial selection of such constructs, incorporating measures of fathers' nurturance and warmth, provision of control, father–child activities, the quality of father–child communication, anger and alienation, and change in paternal involvement over time. Recent research has also highlighted the need to acknowledge and address the possibility that some fathers may have detrimental rather than positive impacts on their children. Studies have also moved from accessing information on fathers solely from mother report to more commonly using child, father, or observational reports to tap fathers' behaviors and emotional connections with their children.

Increasing the availability of data sets that use multidisciplinary perspectives, include multiple reporters and multiple methods, and address various arenas of fathers' family roles can greatly enhance researchers' ability to address the validity of individual reporters, measures, and data-collection strategies and provide a deeper perspective of fathers' roles in families. In addition, using a family

systems perspective can help to broaden psychologists' understanding of how numerous family relationships interact to affect children. For example, research on fathers and children has often not considered the influence of father–mother relationships or controlled for the effects of mothers on child functioning (Amato, 1998).

Another strength of some recent research studies has been the use of more fluid and inclusive definitions of fathers, for example, by including both biological and social fathers and by allowing respondents to nominate the person who most fulfills a father role (see, e.g., Coley, 1998; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2001a; Zimmerman et al., 1995). It appears that research using more inclusive definitions finds more significant results than do studies that impose a rigid conceptualization of family relationships. Low-income and minority families, which have elevated rates of nonmarital childbearing and partnership dissolution, may experience frequent changes in household composition. Fathers often play nontraditional (unmarried, nonresidential) roles, and children may have access to one or more alternate father figures, although these men may be even more transitory than biological fathers. Given this heterogeneity and fluidity, it is important to consider fluid definitions and research designs in future studies of fathers.

A final set of conceptual and methodological issues in which less progress has been made concerns the inability of most of the extant research to adequately address issues of generalizability, selection bias, and causation. Although the research base on low-income, minority, and nonresidential fathers is growing, there are still a great many limitations to the data that are available. Much of the research has been done with samples of convenience, which are not representative of a definable population and thus lack generalizability. Similarly, the response rates of many of the studies that have interviewed fathers directly have been very low, thus leading to concerns over the impact of selection bias. Finally, there is a dearth of longitudinal studies and experimental designs that would better allow the assessment of causality. For example, when a study finds that children with more involved fathers do better in school and on cognitive tests, the general interpretation is that father involvement leads to improved cognitive functioning. However, it is also possible that brighter and more engaging children attract more attention from their fathers. Correlational data do not allow one to compare these different interpretations. Future research should seek to increase the use of representative and random samples of fathers, to explore alternate ways of soliciting and retaining fathers' participation in research studies to boost response rates, and to improve the available data on fathers in longitudinal surveys, experimental designs, and other methodologies to increase researchers' ability to determine causality.

Conclusions

Conceptions of and family-related behaviors by modern fathers have changed dramatically in recent decades, perhaps most dramatically for low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers, who do not fulfill the traditional married breadwinner role. The research reviewed here reveals a number of common threads across these diverse but often overlapping groups of fathers. Regarding patterns of paternal involvement, great diversity is apparent, with some fathers becoming increasingly involved with their children but a growing number appearing more distant and removed. However, research indicates that more detailed measures of fathering behaviors reveal a greater level of paternal involvement than is noted through many large survey studies. Fathering behaviors appear to be influenced by numerous realms, including economic, psychological, cultural, and relational issues that might affect both fathers and other family members. Research is just beginning to address possible interactions between these multiple realms to expand understanding of the supports of and barriers to father involvement. Finally, although more process-oriented methods have provided support for fathers' influence on children's development, these findings raise some concerns. In particular, whereas greater father involvement appears to be consistently linked to improved cognitive and school functioning for children and adolescents, results are less positive regarding socioemotional development. Future research needs to investigate further the connections between the quality and consistency of father involvement across numerous realms and children's emotional and behavioral functioning.

Although recent research has provided intriguing initial views into low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers and their children, a great deal remains to be learned. Given the diversity across different families, understanding men's experiences, beliefs, and influences is a daunting task. At the same time, the study of fathers represents an exciting area of research where conceptual, methodological, and policy issues all play integral roles in generating an ever-expanding research agenda.

In particular, this review has highlighted the need to attend more closely and systematically to a number of issues. First, methodological rigor is needed to improve the quality of the samples and data from which conclusions are drawn. Increased availability of data from representative and random samples of fathers will increase researchers' ability to generalize results and to compare across different studies. The use of multiple reporters, multiple methods, and increasingly sophisticated and process-oriented measures will greatly enhance the depth of researchers' knowledge and their ability to assess the validity and reliability of their data. Second, expanding theoretical and conceptual work on men's development and fathers' roles in family life will allow psychologists to pursue increasingly detailed, transactional, and process-oriented models of fathering behaviors. Third, multidisciplinary teams of researchers and new scholars with broad training across a variety of social science fields will help to build on the strengths of individual disciplines of research. In combination, such advances will significantly enhance understanding of the lives and impact of low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers.

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